

Phone Home

Teacher-to-parent contact through monthly phone calls strengthens the ties between school and home.

As I prepared to teach a multiage class, I had plenty of decisions to make. How would our team of three teachers handle reading instruction for a broader range of abilities? Could we manage pull-outs without too many interruptions? What would we do about teaching math? And how could we address parent concerns about placing their students in a 5-6 classroom?

At meetings during the previous school year, parents had listened to our reasons for beginning a multiage program and were cautiously positive. We had assured them that one benefit of keeping students for two years would be a closer tie between school and home. Now it was time to wrestle with the specifics of how to deliver on that promise.

A weekly classroom newsletter, a school-to-home envelope every Tuesday with notices and student work, and a system for notifying parents of

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student progress between report cards were all in place. What more should I be doing? As I reflected on past interactions with parents, I remembered one of the most painful. A furious father came to see me on the last day of school to complain bitterly about his son's grades. Pulled away from the end-of-the-year teacher's luncheon, I defended myself, protesting, "I sent you a written notice of every assignment your son was missing." The father shot back, "But you never phoned me."

Making Contact

So I decided to try phoning home. I divided my class list of 28 into fourths and made sure I had correct phone numbers. I flipped through attendance cards to find out with whom each student was living and wrote down any last names that differed. At Curriculum Night during the first week of school, I announced that unless parents asked me not to, I planned to call each of them once a month with no particular agenda in mind—just to hear any concerns or answer any questions. Then I set aside a time each week to do it.

Some weeks, my Saturday afternoon calling was finished in 10 or 15 minutes. Six of the seven calls might be answered by machines. Only two of the six messages left might result in a call back to me. Other weeks, every phone call was answered by a parent eager to talk.

I decided on an open-ended introduction that gave me something to say to answering machines: "Hi, this is Mrs. Gustafson, ____'s teacher at North City. I'm making my monthly phone call and wonder if you have any questions or anything you'd like to talk about." Parents have taken it from there.

Monthly phone calls have kept me up-to-date on my students' lives. Without them, I might not have known that



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one quiet girl often had late assignments because she was competing in gymnastics, that a boy's father was taking over custody, that several 5th grade girls were picking on one another at recess, that a beloved grandfather had died. Parents have a regular time to check on the information their students bring home: "He says he doesn't have to write the letter about Marian Anderson because he was at reading class when you assigned it. Is that right?"

Some monthly calls have been difficult. During one lengthy conversation, my husband became aware that my stress level was going up, and he came over to give me a back rub as I finished the last 15 minutes of the 45-minute call. At those times I remind myself that it's hard for parents (myself included) not to see their children as reflections of themselves but easy to take their chil-

dren's difficulties personally. Sometimes the news I get is sad: abuse in a child's past, a hurtful episode of name calling, an upcoming move because a parent has lost a job.

Positive Results

On balance, though, phoning home has been worthwhile. Some solid academic progress has come, at least in part, from this regular communication. One mother, whose daughter I had taught several years before, had been somewhat critical of me at Curriculum Night the year her son joined my class. Several months and several phone calls later, she told me how pleased she was that her son was in my class and that I was calling. "Even if you just leave a message on the machine and I don't call back," she told me, "I'm reminded that you care about my son and about how

important his education is."

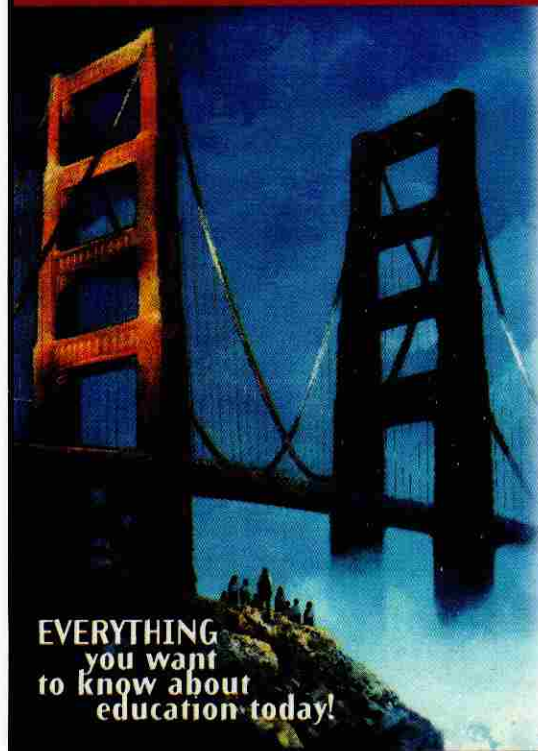
Another parent was staying with her brother, who lived in our attendance area but sent his child to private school. One month, when I left a message with him, he surprised me by saying that he had been talking about me. "My daughter's private school sent out a survey asking how they could improve. I told them they should call home every month, like my niece's public school teacher does."

What's one way to strengthen support for public education? Phone home. ■

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